

A Very Scary Christmas

Mick was about 12 kilometers out of Crentham when he heard a sound so loud, so terrible, he thought the Apocalypse had come to kick the crap out him. It was like a deafening sound mix of an air raid siren and a roaring T-Rex. Only 100 times worse.

He swung his HiLux off the road, into the low, desert scrub, ducking below the dash lest he end up like the splattered bugs on the bonnet, and hit the brakes.

The hellish din had come from above. Or seemed to. He craned his head as he searched for its source. The cloudless, deepening-blue sky revealed nothing.

Suddenly a camel crashed sideways against the grill with a yowl of pain and terror, jolting vehicle and driver, then limped with great difficulty into the desert. A big, bloody chunk had been torn out of its left flank, and its left hind leg hung limply from a single strand of cartilage. It got about 50 meters, then collapsed. It made no attempt to get up.

“Shit.” Mick grabbed his Winchester.

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Trembling in shock, the camel released a succession of

terse growls. A thunderous rifle shot ended its suffering.

“What the hell did this to you?” Mick said, examining a huge bite that had been taken out of the animal. Did he really want to know?

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The wind had picked up. What had been an unassuming breeze was now a prodding gust that yammered in Mick’s ears. As he opened the driver’s-side door of the HiLux, he heard something. A scream maybe. It was hard to tell. He wasn’t even sure what had made it. It could have been a human or an animal. The wind had transported the sound from the distant ranges, where he’d spent the day shooting feral pests—donkeys, camels, wild boars—invasive species the Western Australian government was paying him to shoot dead.

He plunked behind the wheel of the HiLux, looked across at the partly chewed camel. It would be night soon. He didn’t want to be out here in the dark. Not even with his rifle and more ammo than there were feral pests.

He drove off like a rally car driver.

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Crentham had a pub that served cold beer and hot meals and could put him up for the night. So said Google. Perth was over 500 kilometers away. As much as he'd love to see the missus and kids on Christmas day, the second he stepped through his front door, he'd have to do a 1-80 and drive back.

Christmas with strangers in a town straddling nowhere. The beer better be cold and the chips hot.

* * *

The blazing yellow sun had faded to an orange hump poking above the desert's edge, bathing the landscape in dim reddish shades of gray. The temperature had hit 44 degrees earlier. It would probably drop to zero once the sky had sucked all of the heat out of the air.

Crentham was no tourism commercial. Just a smattering of old nondescript buildings. The only standout being a two-story Federation-style pub. But what a standout. Was he going to get blind tonight!

So where was everybody? Trundling down the main street, he couldn't see a single soul—or motor vehicle. The joint looked deserted.

There was something in the street, a little further on.

Right in the middle of it. Make that a number of things. What the . . . ? Beer kegs. Dozens of them. Arranged in an elongated S pattern. What were they doing there?

He parked the HiLux in front of a teensy post office and got out. He stared at the kegs awhile. Their presence and odd positioning in the street gave him the heebie-jeebies, if just a mild dose. Had the town been visited by alcoholic aliens?

He approached the first keg. Was it full or empty? Only one way to find out. *Full*. So was the second one. So was the third. So why weren't they and the others in the pub basement where they belonged?

"Hey, mister?" said a sobbing voice.

A six-year-old boy, face streaked with tears, stood on the road, in front of the pub's entrance. "Hey there, young fella," Mick said. He glanced around. "Where's your mum and dad?"

"Have you seen Santa?"

Mick walked over to him. "No, I haven't, pal. But can you keep a secret?"

The boy sniffed, then nodded faintly.

"Santa will be dropping by once you're in bed fast asleep."

The boy stared blankly at Mick, then squealed in horror and scurried toward the pub. His mother, a honey

blonde in her late-thirties with a mauve birthmark on her right cheek, stuck her head out of the entrance door. “What are you doing outside?” she whispered, furious. “Get in here. *Now*.” She looked at Mick. “Who are you?”
“I’m—”

Scanning the sky, she beckoned him inside. “Come on. You can’t stay out here.”

He glanced up at the midnight-blue heavens for God only knew what as he did as ordered.

* * *

At first blush, the pub looked empty, but then townsfolk began to appear, cautiously. A beefy truckie in gray Stubbies and a navy blue singlet rose from behind the bar. An old married couple helped each other up beside him. The husband was a bit wonky on his feet. “Ooh, me leg!” he groaned in a whisper.

“You got up too fast,” his wife whispered.

A young Aboriginal guy wearing a mustard beanie and a toothless middle-aged woman in an unflatteringly short pink dress looked out from under a billiard table. The woman gave Mick a lewd, gummy grin. “Ow ya goin, luv?”

He nodded “hello.” Why was everyone hiding—and

whispering?

“Have you seen Santa?” the truckie asked, face laden with concern. “Is he close by?”

Mick smiled uncertainly. Was the truckie having a lend of him?

The pub’s owner, a short, well-wrinkled woman in her sixties, emerged from an adjoining room with the boy’s father, a tattooed bogan sporting a ginger mullet, and a young shell-shocked married couple. She scrutinized Mick. “And your name is?”

“I’m Mick,” he said at normal volume.

She made a keep-it-down motion with her hands. “Not so loud. What are you doing here?”

He lowered his voice. “I work for the state government. I shoot feral pests. Look, what’s going on? What’s with all the beer kegs on the road?”

“You do know what time of the year it is?”

“Of course. Christmas time.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

Head trembling irritably, she leaned forward for emphasis. “Santa’s coming.” She glanced at the others. “Now, everybody, hide!”

Mick stayed put for a second, then shrugged and hunched his six-foot-four frame under the table next to

one where the boy and his parents were huddled. *When in Rome.*

He happened to look at the toothless woman. She wagged her tongue at him. She wanted his body. Wanted it bad.

A loud thud came from outside. Then another loud thud. Then another. It sounded like large rocks were blitzing the street.

Whimpering, the boy hugged his mother tight.

“Whatever you do, stay down,” the pub’s owner whispered from behind the bar. “I bloody well mean it.”

A terrific crash electroshocked Mick. Something heavy duty had hit the pub’s tin roof.

Right. That did it. He’d had enough of this BS. He wanted to know what was going on, and he wanted to know the day before yesterday. He unfolded himself and marched to a window.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the boy’s mother whispered. “Get away from there.”

The light from a full moon alleviated the darkness somewhat, enabling Mick to see what had made all the noise. “Bloody hell,” he muttered. Half-eaten bits of animal, everything from heads to coiled piles of steaming intestines, were strewn on the street, soaking the dirt with blood that looked like India ink in the

gloom.

The slaughterhouse sky fall continued. A water buffalo's hind quarters dive-bombed a rusted petrol bowser across the street. A boar's snout bounced off the dirt and rolled out of sight. A deer's leg slapped down near the window, performing a crude pirouette before motionlessness set in.

Oh no!

Oh shit!

It wasn't a deer's leg. It was an arm. A *human* arm.

A second ear-syringing crash let everyone know that something else had slammed into the roof. Then a headless, legless, one-armed corpse—a man's if a partially devoured penis was anything to go by—landed outside the pub's entrance with a nauseating *vummp*.

Aghast, Mick turned toward the boy's mother. "There's a dead body out there. What the fuck is . . . ?"

The extinction-level cacophony that had violated his sanity an hour ago repeated the offense. This time it was louder. Whatever was making it seemed to be hovering directly above the pub.

He doubled over, covered his ears. The others assumed their own agonized positions. The Aboriginal guy tried to ward off the unsociable, noise-polluting spirits with a droning tribal song.

Mick staggered over to the boy's father. "Oi!" he shouted. "Is there another way outta here?!"

"What?!"

"Is there another way outta here?!"

"Huh?!"

He'd just have to find his own way out. He staggered off. The horrendous clamor made him feel as if he were trying to walk in a straight line on the deck of a storm-tossed sloop.

He searched the next room. Searched the next. No luck. A hallway brought him to the pub's kitchen. There was a door at the opposite end, and what appeared to be a beer garden beyond it. Yes!

As he made for the door, the cacophony stopped. The silence hit like a bitch slap. It didn't last long. A thunderous *thump* shook the pub as something immensely heavy came to rest in the main drag.

He grabbed the door handle. *Ouch!* Someone pinched him on the bum. The toothless woman. She ogled him pornographically. "Where ya goin, gorgeous?"

"To get my rifle. I'm not going down without a fight."

"Take me with you."

"No. You'll be safer here."

"Please. I haven't had it in weeks."

She lunged at him with wide open lips. He pushed her

away. “What do you think you’re doing? I’m a married man.”

She lunged again. “So am I.”

He shoved her/him/whomever off and stumbled outside.

* * *

Mick skulked into a narrow lane beside the pub. It intersected with the main street. The clank and rattle of weighty chains came from that direction.

All of a sudden a voice boomed like a dungeon door slamming shut in the bowels of Hell. “GRRRRRROGGG!”

An empty beer keg, top bitten off, hit the ground with a *bonnnng* just inches from Mick. He fell on his rump, shuffled hurriedly away from the keg.

He felt his mental tethers snapping loose, as if he and his mind were about to go their separate ways. Maybe they already had. No man could see and hear the things he had on this Christmas Eve and retain his sanity. Surely not.

The ground quaked. A Jurassic something or other was tromping about in the main street. That’s what it sounded like.

Mick crept to the front corner of the pub and peered

around it into the main street.

He *had* lost his mind.

In the street, outside the pub, was a sight that belonged on the cover of a death metal Christmas album. Eight gnarring crocodiles, *huge* crocodiles, at least five meters high, standing erect and lined up two by two, were chained to a colossal sleigh. Each croc wore a red Santa's elf cap and a red leather vest upon which was an illustration, no two the same, of Santa in silhouette committing a horrific act. Cannibalism and decapitation were just two of the acts depicted. The sleigh looked less like a sleigh than it did an oversized open-topped Panzer tank. Huge medieval-sharp metal spears, 20 minimum, slid in and out of the sides of it with harrowing force and rapidity. Blood and globs of flesh flew off the spear tips. An enormous horn, fashioned after a shrieking demonoid skull, sat on the front of the sleigh.

Then there was Santa himself.

Standing 30 feet high, and nearly as wide, he was dressed in the usual costume, and sported a typically big, bushy white beard. His teeth weren't strictly regulation, however. They had to have been a foot long, maybe longer, and were wickedly pointed. His fingers terminated in curved black claws that made shoulder-tensing screeches when they scraped against the beer kegs, which he downed like whiskey shots. He discarded

a pair of kegs, snatched up another pair, chomped the tops off.

Panting in terror, Mick backed up against the side of the pub. The sweat spilling off him made audible splats on his work boots.

The HiLux was enticingly close. He could reach it in seconds if he sprinted. He inhaled an “I can do it!” breath.

Sprinting this time.

The crocs sighted him making for the HiLux. Thick strings of saliva hurled from their snapping jaws as they pulled their restraints taut. *Let us at him!*

Santa, mid-keg-scul, grunted in annoyance and turned toward the disturbance. His burning-red eyes burned redder.

Mick had just collected the rifle and a box of ammo when an empty beer keg crashed through the HiLux’s rear windscreen. Glass peppered his face. He slumped out of the HiLux, almost collapsed. He removed a chunk of bloody glass from his forehead and poked it sluggishly with a finger. It sure felt real.

He gazed up, way up, at Santa, who glared down, way down, at him with eyes that glowed like hot coals in the darkness. Santa sure looked real. Realer even.

Mick became aware of the Winchester in his hands.

What was it doing there? Oh yes, that was right. He remembered now. He plodded into the street like Wyatt Earp about to face down the latest uppity gunslinger to harass the good citizens of Dodge. Crimson rills trickled down his face. He raised the rifle. It was hard to aim it accurately with all the blood dripping in his eye. What a darn nuisance.

The rifle's barrel suddenly swung down. The toothless woman had pushed it. "If I get you some Band-Aids," she said, "can I have a kiss? With tongues?"

He had a good mind to shoot her. "Will you piss off?! I'm trying to kill Santa!"

"Don't worry about Santa, mate. I'll sort bloody Santa out."

She strutted toward Santa as fast as her bandy legs and high heels would permit. "Oi! A word in your ear, sunshine!"

Santa contemplated her momentarily, then with a surly grunt, yanked a chrome lever on the side of the sleigh. The chains fell off the first two crocs. They charged at her like a pair of racing goannas. She halted, gave them the finger. Undeterred, the first croc seized her with surprisingly dexterous forelegs and bit her in half from the top down. Blood sprayed from each half like water out of a fire sprinkler. The second croc snapped hold of her feet, thrashed its head from side to

side until her bandy legs and all were in its jaws. Her head landed at Mick's work boots. "Hi ya, sexy," she gurgled, bubbles of blood popping in her mouth.

He leaped back in horror. "Sheeeeeeit!"

Bursting with rage, he pumped round after round into the two crocs, stinging but, alas, not killing them.

Santa ho-ho-hoed booming, clutching his mammoth belly.

"You think this is funny?" Mick said. "You think this is funny? Well, laugh at this, dickhead!" He fired the remaining rounds at the corpulent giant's head. They pinged off it. One punched a hole in an antediluvian sheet-metal sign atop the pub. Even after he'd run out of ammo, he kept squeezing the rifle's trigger. Imaginary bullets were limitless. Limitless but, as it turned out, completely ineffective. Luckily, he still had the rifle, which he proceeded to chuck at Santa with a primal roar of rage. It clocked one of the crocs on the head.

Mick bolted toward the HiLux. How come it was all blurry and parked miles and *miles* away?

The earth shook beneath Santa's pile-driving footfalls, and puffs of dust launched themselves into the cooling air, as he gave chase.

Mick stumbled to the ground, picked himself up. He'd just got to the HiLux when Santa slapped it aside. It

spun across the street and demolished a vacant shop. There went his no claims bonus.

A hand, a chubby hand, as big as a double-sized bed reached down out of the sky and lifted him up, cherry-picker high. He knew whose hand it was. He recognized the claws.

A chilly breeze blew some of the haze out of Mick's head. There was Santa just below. Larger than life. He looked pissed. Not drunk pissed, pissed pissed. "YOU'VE BEEN VERY NAUGHTY!" he boomed. He opened his cavernous mouth. A sewer would have smelled nicer. His pointed teeth lined the inside of it like dazzling white fence pickets.

Mick heard insane cackling, his own, as he was lowered upside down into the nightmarish gob. Caustic fumes rose from Santa's gut. They ate away Mick's eyes and stripped the flesh from his bones.

No more Christmases for him.

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